Practicing Liberatory Pedagogy: Women of Color in College Classrooms

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Abstract

Following the works of Patricia Williams, bell hooks, and other feminist scholars of color, we address what it means for women of color teaching social justice issues in predominantly white classrooms. Very little research has been done to illuminate the challenges women of color face in classrooms and what this means for liberatory practice. We grapple with the question, “What are the particular experiences of women of color from various racial and ethnic backgrounds with white student resistance, specifically in relation to issues of authority?” We also provide recommendations for classroom practice as well as address policy recommendations to structurally support women of color.

Keywords

critical pedagogy, critical race feminism, liberatory pedagogy, women of color

Introduction

As educators committed to addressing social justice issues in our classrooms, we work rigorously in providing frameworks for our students to find voice and gain critical consciousness. We go through great lengths to get our students to understand their own experiences and their social positions in relation to power and privilege. We define pedagogy not only as “teaching methods” but the entire process of creating knowledge and the many ways students, teachers, and academic disciplines interact and define themselves and each other in relation to larger society (Maher & Thompson-Tetrault, 1994).

We have our students engage with their own cultural identities, understanding themselves as political beings, guiding them to discover their individual and collective agency in defining themselves, giving contextualized meaning to their world. By understanding their own social positions, students can begin to build a critical understanding of social inequities, and by reflecting on their own lives, as well as their actions, they can actively challenge and interrupt hegemonic ideologies. We all have a profound love for teaching. However, along with this love, also comes the frustration and emotional work that as women of color we experience when teaching social justice issues in predominantly white classrooms. Very little research has been done to illuminate the challenges women of color face in classrooms and what this means for liberatory practice. Studies have tended to focus on the increasingly mixed student population, whereas the racial and ethnic identity of teachers/professors is rarely addressed (TuSmith & Reddy, 2002).

In search for answers to the many challenges that come with being women of color teaching liberatory pedagogy in predominantly white classrooms, we grapple with the question, “What are the particular experiences of women of color from various racial and ethnic backgrounds with white student resistance, specifically in relation to issues of authority?” Other questions we address are the following: How can women of color practice liberatory pedagogy in predominantly white classrooms? How do we teach social justice issues and work to get our students to become aware of their own and each other’s social positions?
We begin by addressing the critiques of critical pedagogy regarding teacher authority, particularly in relation to female teachers of color. This article includes narratives by three female graduate students of color. With us we bring our own unique perspectives, including; one Latina, one African American, and one Pacific islander, respectively. It is only recently that scholars have (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Hendrix, 2007; Maher, 1987; Maher & Thompson-Tetault, 1994; McLaren, 1994; Torres, 2003; Vargas, 2002) begun to examine the multiple group memberships of female professors of color. We conclude by providing recommendations for classroom practice as well as address policy recommendations to structurally support women of color.

Power and Authority

Freire (1970) has addressed the issue of power and authority in the classroom, arguing that authority exists within a relational process and is manifested according to the structure of power and the relational contingencies at work. Thus, teachers must critically use their power in the interest of democratic life or “on the side of freedom” (Freire, 1998, p. 74) to authorize dialogical conditions in the classroom. These conditions cultivate the knowledge and experience that students bring to the classroom and their efforts to learn, study, and produce meaningful knowledge. Critical pedagogues differentiate between authority and authoritarianism. As critical pedagogues argue, teacher authority is always present. Teacher authority refers to the power teachers possess to influence direct learning, thought, and behavior through their responsibility to educate students (Darder, 2002). As teachers, ultimately we are responsible for making decisions about the materials we will use, content we will teach, and purpose of the course as a whole. To give a brief description, the course was largely framed around questions related to the intersections between identity, performance, representational practices, and youth culture.

As a way to get students actively engaged with the course I require them to screen films each week and work in small groups to prepare a presentation on the film of their choice. During the second to last class, a heated discussion broke out regarding the film “Dangerous Minds,” in particular a scene where Lou Anne Johnson recites lyrics from a Bob Dylan song. The scene, which takes place in a high school English class, starts off with the following:

Lou Anne: “I will not go down underground somebody tells me that death’s comin’ round.” Okay,
this is another Dylan poem. Now, is that a code or
does it just mean what it says?

No one says anything. A few students shuffle in their seats,
stare out the window blankly. She purses her lips in annoy-
ance, puts her glasses on her face, and continues reading on:

Lou Anne: “And I will not carry myself off to die.  
When I go to my grave my head will be high. My 
head will be high.” What does that mean?

Silence permeates the air. Her eyes get wide in disbelief. 
Pleadingly, she says to the class:

Lou Anne: Anybody?

Again, no one says anything. Quite disappointed, she 
says with exasperation in her voice:

Lou Anne: Nobody?

Still no one says anything. She takes off her glasses, 
lacks at the class in frustration, and says, “Is there some-
thing I should know?,” at which point one young Latina 
student says:

Latina Girl 1: [Fiercely] Yeah, I tell you. You ratted 
on Raul, Gusmato, and Emilio.

Other students chime in and accuse Lou Anne of ratting 
out Raul, Gusmato, and Emilio, which also got them sus-
pended from school. On the defensive, Lou Anne says to 
them:

Lou Anne: [Defensively] Hey, I didn’t rat on any-
body?

Somewhere in the background you can hear a male student 
saying, “snitches get stitches.” Lou Anne’s breath catches in 
her throat, and she asks with a slight irritation in her voice:

Lou Anne: Do you want to talk about this?

As her students continue to make snide remarks, Lou 
Anne becomes visibly frustrated. In an effort to quell their 
dissatisfaction she gives them the option of leaving the class:

Lou Anne: Well, if you all feel that strongly about it, 
leave the room.

At that very moment, a male student says faintly, almost 
inaudibly, in disbelief, “What?” Lou Anne strengthens her 
resolve and reiterates that the students have the option to 
leave:

Lou Anne: Hey, listen nobody’s forcing you to be 
here. You have a choice. You can stay or you can 
leave.

Suddenly, a young man in the back of the room who had 
been mostly silent confronts her. He says, “Lady why you 
playing this game? We don’t have a choice?” Incredulous—
to a fault she asks, “You don’t have a choice? You don’t 
have a choice on whether not you’re here?” The young man 
responds by telling her “Nah, if we leave we don’t get to 
graduate. If we stay, we have to put up with you.” Lou 
Anne replies, “Well, that’s a choice isn’t it? You have 
choice. You either don’t graduate or you have to put up 
with me. It may not be a choice you like but it is a choice.” 
All of a sudden, with passion and defiance a young Black 
female student who sits in the first row of the classroom 
says back to Lou Anne:

Black Girl 1: Man, you don’t understand nothing. I 
mean, you don’t come from where we live. You . . . 
[stuttering] you’re not bused here.

To that question, Lou Anne replies by asking whether 
she has a choice to get on the bus:

Lou Anne: Do you have a choice to get on that bus?

The black girl challenges Lou Anne’s notion that it is a 
choice for her to get on that bus:

Black Girl 1: Man, you come and live in my neigh-
borhood for one week and then you tell me if you 
gotta a choice.

True to form, Lou Anne delivers a very emboldened self-
righteous speech about choices:

Lou Anne: There are a lot of people in your neigh-
borhood who choose NOT [emphasis] to get on that 
bus. What do they choose to do? They choose to 
go out and sell drugs. They choose to go out and 
kill people. They choose to do a lot of other things, 
but they choose not to get on that bus. The people 
who choose to get on that bus which are YOU 
[elongates] are the people who are saying, “I will 
not carry myself down to die. When I got to my 
grave my head will be high.” That is a choice. 
There are no victims in this classroom!

A few coughs are heard as the camera takes a close-up 
shot of two black female students’ faces. One pipes up with 
attitude and says, “Why do you care anyway? You just here 
for the money.” Lou Anne shoots back, “Cause I make a 
choice to care and honey the money ain’t that good.” The
scene wraps with one Latino male student in front of the classroom saying, “Read it again, Ms. Johnson.” A bit surprised by his request Ms. Johnson picks up her glasses, puts them on her face, and reads the first two lines of that Dylan poem again. She asks, “Does that mean just what it says?,” and this time around the class actually does engage with her in a lively discussion about the meaning and interpretation of that poem.

As I watched the clip I felt excited because the film had raised so many critical issues for us to talk about structure versus agency, the rural/urban/suburban divide in schooling, and so on. The group that was presenting had written some very meaty discussion questions for the class to sink their teeth into and to wrap their heads around complex weighty matters. They started us off by asking, “Does everyone have a choice in life?” Immediately, hands flew up everywhere. My class was abuzz with anticipation, excitement, and enthusiasm. A lot of students said, yes, they believe that everyone does have a choice or choices in life. To capture the energy of the moment the group moved onto their second question, “Does someone’s social class, gender, and ethnicity limit their choices or options in life?” Again, hands shot up everywhere. I thought to myself, “ooh, that’s a really good question,” not to mention I was “pleased as punch” they were hitting on intersectionality. My students—white and of color threw out responses that challenged and also affirmed the notion that everybody always has a choice or is able to exercise agency in his or her life.

The deeper the conversation went the more issues it raised for many students in my class. I heard students from who I had hardly heard two peeps from all semester share their thoughts. Yay! My students were finally getting the hang of what it meant to facilitate a discussion. It was like watching a beautiful masterpiece being sculpted, carved, or painted before me. And then it happened. The conversation slipped over into the education realm seamlessly. Words such as charter school, school choice, inequality, urban, suburban, school budgets, and so on were in air and so was dialogue regarding the politics of making education policies. Then, one of my education majors, a senior-secondary and inclusive track said, “Things are getting better. Right now in New York City, there are all these private donors and administrators become beholden to the benefactor. Of course, my ed. major (let’s call her Mary) shot back at me, “I’m not saying that charter schools are going to fix everything but people are trying, they’re trying to do something.” I could tell from her sharp tone that she felt like I was dumping on her chosen profession, so I tried to switch gears and open a broader conversation about education as public good.

I threw out what I thought was a fairly simple question to the whole class, “Okay, well how do schools get funded?” Mary quipped, “by their tax base.” I then followed that up by asking, “So, if a student lives in a district that isn’t wealthy what do you suppose the quality of education is going to be like for them?” It was a general question that was open to the public. A couple of students raised their hands to answer the question and then a dynamic conversation in regards to funding, resources, and access began to occur. After a few minutes had gone by, I posed a question that to my mind was essential to the film, the discussion, and was at the heart of most educational debates of the 21st century.

I said, “So, who do you think benefits from the current school system being the way it is?” No sooner had I said the words out of my mouth, my class was alive in raw emotion.

The first student to jump on the bandwagon was my sociology and women’s studies (who I will call Keri from now on). Keri stated that she thought the current school system only actually worked to benefit members of the dominant group, that is, white middle-class folks. This, of course, rose the ire of Mary who launched into a speech about how “it,” by which she meant educational inequality, was not intentional and people weren’t doing it on purpose. And just as we were about to tiptoe into the sticky realm of intention versus effect, class was over. I packed up my things as my students filed out with i-pods and cell phones in tow.

A few seconds passed. I was alone in the classroom. I shut down the projector and then tried to put the chairs back in the original formation we found them in when we came in. The door flew open, and Mary was there. I turned to her and said, “Oh, I thought you left.” She told me she did but she came back to talk to me about what happened in class today. I wasn’t sure exactly what she meant, but I said okay anyway and told her to go ahead. She took her cue and for 1 ½ hours I endured what I can only describe as a bitter diatribe. Mary accused Keri (a black female) of attacking her in class and me of siding with Keri and with one other Latina student in class who was very outspoken about her positions.

Then, she told me that she felt “marginalized” because of her opinions and ideas and that she knew other white students who felt the same way but were too afraid to say anything. I tried to maintain my demeanor, but I felt myself virtually getting HOT under the collar. Mary continued.
She told me that I shouldn’t give my opinions in class because the students who do not agree with me feel as if they cannot say anything in the course. And last but not least I allowed certain people to dominate our conversations too much. I could not believe what I am hearing. Had she just intimated in a class about representation no less than Keri was the “angry black woman” and the Latina female, a jive “Sapphire?”

In my head I thought, “Did she actually try to tell me how to teach the class?” As calmly as I could (still reeling) I explained to her that she along with Keri and the other Latina student were among “high talkers” in my class—they were always sharing their ideas. To her claim that she felt Keri was attacking her in class today I asked in a swift prose, “Would we be having this conversation if Keri was a white female student, not black?” Mary assured me that we would because her issue had nothing to do with race. She just felt that Keri was coming at her in manner that made her feel very uncomfortable today.

I went on to address her concern over me “sharing my opinions” as a misreading of my pedagogical style, philosophy, approaches, method, technique, practice, and orientations. I told her that when I inserted “myself” into the conversation it was because most likely I was trying to redirect a discussion which had gone way off course and/or rather wayward.” In the end, although she conceded defeat and chalked it up to a misunderstanding of my pedagogy and of the Black and Latina females in my class I felt uneasy by the outcome.

I walked away trying to make some headway as to what exactly had just happened here. The more I thought about it the angrier I got, so I went in search of a faculty member of color who I trust to give me a sage advice and wisdom but also strategies to combat this. I had never encountered anything like this before except during the first semester of my job as a TA. I was teaching a discussion section of a required course for preservice teachers. In the interest of assisting the students in reflecting on the profession, they were required to write weekly journals in which they responded critically to at least one reading for that week. On the first day of my section I explained to them that the purpose of the weekly journals was for them to draw out salient themes from the readings, connect them, and contemplate the broader implications for the practice of schooling as we already know it.

At first, students seemed to struggle with the concept quite a bit. Often they complained they weren’t sure what it was I wanted. I considered going easy on them as I had quite a bit. Often they complained they weren’t sure what I wanted. I considered going easy on them as I had already begun to develop a reputation among the other TAs as being an extremely harsh grader. But after much thought, reflection, contemplation, and mental anguish I swiftly reneged. I realized that criticism was an opportunity to grow and reflect on my teaching pedagogy and that if I played my cards right it could well turn out be a “teachable moment” for me. During the next few weeks, I engaged my students in conversations about writing being a process and in some settings an academic exercise that one improves at slowly over time.

I offered a rewrite policy because I wanted students to see their growth and development as writers and thinkers in very tangible, real, concrete, material, and also beneficial ways. As the semester wore on I noticed marked improvement not only in the grades but also in the level of critical thinking that my students were bringing to the writing assignments. They were beginning to see the connections between readings, raise critical issues around the politics of education, interrogate their social location, explore dynamics of power and privilege in the classroom, and extend the author’s analyses beyond the article in question. A day or two later, after the last day of class I opened my email to find a little note waiting there attached to a peer evaluation from a student in my section that read as follows:

Afua,

I just wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed your class this semester. You really challenged me to engage in the text and I feel that my writing improved because of your high expectations. I enjoyed our class discussions and the manner that they operated in. I really wish that I could take another similar class next semester but my schedule is in the max amount of credits. Hopefully I will have a chance to take another course that allows me to talk about issues that we face in the classroom again. Thank you for a great semester and have a good winter break.

I was in shock and awe but also very elated to receive such a sweet note from my student. And it was then that I realized that I had an impact, perhaps not in the way that I thought. I filed the note away in my metaphorical smile file and periodically I go back and look at it. The line I love is, “I feel that my writing improved because of your high expectations.” Okay, so in hindsight, maybe I didn’t get her all the way to the finish line in terms of content, but I did get her some place quite significant in terms of developmental process. I don’t share this story to illustrate what a phenomenal TA or instructor I am but rather because I have undergone a radical shift in my thinking about my role in the classroom. Dalia Rodriguez (2009) among other scholars has documented the myriad of ways that women of color’s authority is disdissed, dismissed, diminished, and flat-out ignored (p. 484).

Tales of white arrogance indicate that race and gender hierarchies construct how women of color faculty have to negotiate power and authority in white classrooms (Luthra, 2002; Ng, 1997; Rodriguez, 2009; Vargas, 2002). No doubt in my own account white arrogance manifested itself in Mary’s audacity to suggest that I ought not insert my
opinion in class so much or in my students attempts to dub me as the “mean TA” out of the whole bunch.

White arrogance is defined as unconscious feelings of white superiority, that are deeply entrenched in the minds of whites; it permeates the classroom mostly in (re)actions of students toward women of color faculty members and/or teaching assistants (Rodriguez, 2009). Since many dominant students have never seen women of color in positions of authority before, female faculty of color are considered anomalies or exceptions (Luthra, 2002). We are subject to being demonized, criticized, scrutinized, and accused of pushing our own agenda, especially should we have social justice leanings in our work and courses (Luthra, 2002, Ng, 1997; Rodriguez, 2009; Vargas, 2002). Thus, our position and power in the classroom is always a precarious one—our intentions are questioned, held suspect (Luthra, 2002; Ng, 1997, 2002; Rodriguez, 2009).

To practice libratory pedagogy in the 21st century means something entirely different for a white feminist pedagogue than it would for a black feminist pedagogue such as myself. That is to say resistance is futile—what I mean by that is resistance will always be a part of teaching in white classrooms, contradictions in whiteness will always exist for us, and efforts to “resist the resistance” or “resist the privileged” may be counterproductive. This is not to say that we should let go of consciousness raising, self-awareness, or any of that especially because that is where the real catalyst and/or spark of systemic change begins.

But what I am saying is that it might benefit those of us who do antioppression work to shift some of the heavy lifting from content-focused measures to a process-based ones. So, often in our courses, I think we can be hung up on our students “getting it” (whatever it is), whether it be racism, sexism, gender oppression, heteronormativity, disability, and so on. However, when students become more critical thinkers, astute writers, or active learners is that not as much an indication of growth as is confronting one’s own white privilege?

As I reflect on that note I received almost three years ago now I am inclined to believe so. Thus, I offer two pedagogical strategies for women of color teaching in white classrooms:

1. High expectations—challenge, challenge, challenge! It has been my experience that white students in my class have never had their work critiqued, much less by a person of color, which they tend to interpret as an affront to their personhood and to also their whiteness. Make it explicit early on that you have high expectations for everyone in the course and the critique is about helping them to improve as learners and not for picking on them.

2. Writer/thinker—Often, I find that students’ abilities to engage critically with texts are underdeveloped. In the courses I have taught, white students tend to be most offended at the mere suggestion that perhaps they do not write as well as they fancy themselves to do. It is critical to let students know that as their instructor you are committed to their growth as writers and thinkers and that any and all feedback you provide is only toward that end.

Julianne’s Narrative

My first teaching job after receiving my bachelor’s degree (1999) was at a private urban school in Los Angeles, California, serving a student population that was majority African American. I was a Special Education teacher at Little Citizens of Westside Academy for students in middle school (Grades 7-9). With no teaching experience, I was in a classroom with thirteen students and one teacher’s assistant. The majority of my students lived in the area of south Los Angeles. The challenging aspects about this school setting were the social issues that the students faced daily, including poverty, sexual and substance abuse, gang violence, police surveillance, and criminalization of people in the community. In retrospect, I was very naïve in understanding my role as a teacher and the responsibilities that I was about to embark on at Westside Academy. The teaching profession was the path that I took because it was my first job offer after graduating from college. My experience at this school is special to me because the students taught me to be an organized person/teacher and, most importantly, classroom management skills. The students’ feedback on my style and philosophy of teaching made me realize that I needed further teacher training to be in the position of an educator. I attribute the start of my teaching career to these students because they challenged me to also understand them as people with multiple identities outside of school grounds. I learned communication strategies in how to communicate with students, in a cultural and respectful way. For example, when the students are talking I usually tell them to keep the volume of their conversation down. At times, I assumed that the students were arguing, when yet they were talking about something exciting among themselves. One student once told me, “Miss, this is how we talk (loud and animated), we’re just talking!” This experience taught me that my assumption what a “conversation” is, is not the same as my students. Yet the minimal teaching experience that I had taught me that the “proper” way to converse in a classroom is by “using an inside voice,” which was completely absurd and culturally inappropriate to my students. This leads me to wonder, whose achievement and standard measurements qualify for what students should and should not know in school?
After a year and a half teaching, I decided to pursue a graduate degree in special education. While attending graduate school at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa, I also taught at the Salvation Army, Kula Kokua Elementary School located in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. This therapeutic school setting was different from other schools because the students received beyond standardized forms of education. This school setting taught me to collaborate with parents and colleagues. For example, every week the entire staff at the school would meet regarding each student’s progress in the program. The meetings consisted of therapists, counselors, teachers, administration staff, and a psychiatrist.

This school setting, like most institutions, used the medical model approach\(^4\) to working with students with psychological needs. The students at this setting were mostly preschool age up to Grade 5. The majority of my students were “local,” and many of them were Pacific Islanders. The importance of this setting is that the students’ educational needs were best met through counseling, individualized education, and the use of medication. The problematic challenge of working in this school setting is that the “therapeutical” solution for these students were to isolate them from their peers (removing them from their public “home” schools) and using the medical model approach to “cure” them of their nonconformities in public school. The two issues are that these approaches to educate these students are that of a deficit model and the privileging of Western medicine to be the “be-all-end-all cure” for the assimilation of these students into schools that upheld the values of white, middle-class norms.

The next school that I worked at was a public school called Radford High School. I worked at this school part-time as a special educator and also to fulfill my teaching credential requirements. After completing my credential, I was hired full-time as an inclusive special educator\(^5\) for Grades 9 to 12. Due, in part, to a transient, active military family population, this school’s demographics are more racially diverse. I found this teaching experience the most enjoyable, because I worked with all the students regardless of their (dis)abilities. An important lesson that I learned at this setting was that inclusive education of having regular and special education students together in a classroom could work, if the teachers are invested in this concept.\(^6\) The challenge of working with a transient student population was the lack of community that some students felt, because many of them do not live in one place for a long time. Moreover, the military (Air Force, Army, Marines, and Navy) presence and involvement on campus was a new culture,\(^7\) a variant of colonial education that I was unfamiliar with. I was “indoctrinated” and learned about military ranks and policies from the students. What is apparent at working at this school is the influence of the military on the school policies, funding, and services. The school is named after a U.S. Navy Admiral Arthur W. Radford, a former Chairman of the former Chief of Staff who was stationed in Hawai‘i. This “normalized” military presence on campus also served as a contentious reminder of the political climate on the U.S. occupation of the Hawaiian Islands and the struggles by the Native Hawaiians for sovereignty and independence that has yet to happen.

After living in Hawai‘i for seven years, I returned to Los Angeles. I briefly taught at El Camino Charter High School in east Los Angeles. The students at this school were predominantly Latina/o. The school mission was to prepare students to attend college. These students taught me to use technology and social justice curriculum in my teaching. Moreover, I learned more about grassroots social movements and coalition building. The students challenged long-standing policies at the school that were outdated or “unfair” to them. As part of the school mission, the students are trained to be “agents of change”\(^8\) in their communities. They took knowledge that is learned in the classrooms to their communities. Some students collaborated with organizations around labor disputes, bus transportation strikes, and policies that directly affected their neighborhoods. For instance, the majority of the students took public transportation to get to school. The bus company proposed a hike in the bus fares. The students organized themselves and they testified at the public hearing of the bus fare increase. The outcome of the students efforts resulted in the bus company not raising student fares until the school year was over. As a newly established high school, one challenge for the students was the lack of extracurricular activities. The school did not have an athletic program yet. The students took on the task of forming a boy’s basketball and baseball team, including a league with other charter schools. It is in this school setting that the students taught me to be an “agent of change” and socially conscious critical thinker. The social justice education within this education setting is what motivates me to learn more about issues around race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability, to name a few.

Fast forward several years later, I find myself back in school again and living in central New York. Now in my capacity as a graduate student or teacher’s assistant, I find myself at Syracuse University, a predominantly white college. I am negotiating new pastures and cultural dynamics in this setting. I am learning about how often whiteness is disguised in race-neutral and color-blind ways in institutions and policies. For instance, the diversity in faculty members who are teaching at a university, the racial makeup of students in graduate school, or the assimilationist curriculum in schools that uphold and reinforce white supremacy and privilege. I think the difference in these settings have been my position as an educator, and how often I was questioned by many White students. For instance, it was common for students to ask me a question about the class lecture. I would take the time to look up the answers in my notes and then relate this to the particular student who asked
the question. Shortly thereafter, the same student would then ask the professor the same question. The professor would check with me for the answer before telling the same student. Although these incidents may seem minor, over time these forms of racial microaggressions can take a toll on a person. Derald Wing Sue defines “racial microaggression” as one of the “everyday insults, indignities and demeaning messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages being sent to them” (DeAngelis, 2009).

Although my teaching experiences have led me down the road of becoming more conscious of the social inequities around me, it has also pushed me to recognize the backdrop of white privilege and systemic factors that function to keep marginalized groups in powerless positions. My exposures to diverse student populations have taught me to be humble, resilient, and to continue evolving as a person. The students who I have worked with throughout these schools have taught me about liberatory pedagogy. My education in disability, gender, indigenous, and women studies has also led me to the path of consciousness around issues of control, power, and domination. The ongoing social movements involving some of my students forced me to reflect on the type of teaching pedagogies and professional activism that I want or need to stand for. From my experience, most intellectual settings encourage the asking of questions; however, to me, it is a sort of questioning by the white students toward a person of color like myself that implies authority and superiority and that is problematic. It is not about arguing that whites are intentionally racists or immoral (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) but rather to understand whiteness as a social location of power (Rodriguez, 2009). It is this current racial consciousness that I am coming to terms with as a person of color in a higher education setting. My teaching experiences continue to propel me to seek alternative methodologies to teaching about liberatory pedagogy. As two scholars relate, “It is the whole idea of whiteness as the norm that sets the standards of behavior and expectations in the United States (Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005), thereby affecting my experiences and those of my students” (Muhtaseb, 2007). This essay is a start for me to transform my teaching pedagogies and to challenge universal claims to “truths,” and moreover, to extend the learning and teaching educational spaces to include indigenous and subjugated forms of knowledge.

Nicole’s Narrative

My story comes out of a composition course I taught in the spring semester of 2010 that was termed “Textual Representations of Race and Gender,” a course that I pedagogically approached on the basis of my experiences studying the works of Freire and feminist theory. I had previously taught several sections of first-year writing and advanced academic literacy courses at California State University Fresno (CSUF) and Fresno City College (FCC) where I had consistently used Freire’s work; thus, I called upon some of my early teaching approaches when conducting this class. Teaching at CSUF and FCC were invaluable experiences, though it was starkly different than teaching at Syracuse University. While the curricula certainly took different approaches, what was most noticeable to me and for this current analysis was that the student population at CSUF and FCC is very ethnically diverse in comparison to SU. For instance, student enrollment for the fall of 2009 was as follows:

SU: 53% white, 12% unknown, 8% Asian, 8% African American, 6% Hispanic, and American Indian less than 1% (remaining students were categorized as “nonresident”).
CSUF: 35% white, 34% Hispanic, 15% Asian, 8% unknown, 5% African American, international 2%, and American Indian less than 1%.
FCC: 38% Hispanic, 26% white, 16% Asian/Pacific Islander, 11% unknown, 8% African American, and 1% American Indian.

Based on this information it is apparent that the student of color population at CSUF and FCC actually outnumbers the white student population. In contrast, the student body at SU is predominantly white. Furthermore, 79% of faculty members at SU are white, with the next closest ethnicity being Asian/Pacific Islander at 11%. Had I considered the implications of such statistics before I began teaching at Syracuse University, I may have reconsidered my pedagogical approach to the classroom.

However, when I began teaching at SU, I felt confident and comfortable invoking Freire because my teaching experience had indicated that students benefited from this approach. It was only after one of my classes became volatile that I realized that even as the teacher I was never in the position—in many of my student’ perceptions, at least—to have more authority than them. The challenges came very early and only intensified upon students receiving their unit portfolio and essay grades. To further explore the challenges I faced in this class, I examined how I pedagogically take up Freire, inevitably establishing a combination of the framework I utilized for the class, my social location, and the students’ conceptions of authority, which caused an inflated sense of entitlement and suspicion in several students (Lampman et al., Rodriguez, 2009).

Unfortunately, without much consideration for how my teacher-persona would be received when teaching to a predominately white upper-class audience, I began the first day of class with a discussion about pedagogy. In the interest of promoting a responsible and fair dialogue between myself and the class I chose to draw on Freire by exposing students
to “problem posing education.” After having students read through numerous excerpts from Pedagogy of the Oppressed, I explained some of Freire’s theories more in depth and then asked the class to engage in a discussion regarding their educational experiences.

It is important to acknowledge that out of context these excerpts were difficult for my students to grasp. Therefore, we spent a great deal of time talking about their experience in education. Surprisingly, they often described classes that were evenly distributed between a teacher-centered (banking model) and student-centered (problem-posing) atmosphere. I now believe this to be attributed to the fact that most of these students were from upper-class backgrounds in which they attended schools that afforded a great deal of student autonomy and credence to student experience. In other words, these students were accustomed to their voices being heard and counted (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1996; McIntosh, 1997). This led students to be suspicious of Freire’s theories and (ironically) even more skeptical about the claim that students were at a disadvantage if taught with the banking concept. This same kind of suspicion of claims regarding oppression similarly occurred when reading other texts in the class. For example, students were required to read Haig Bosmajian’s “Introduction to the Language of Oppression,” which details how only people in power have the authority to define names and labels; “Should English Be the Law?,” by Robert King, which argues that English-only laws are unnecessary and racist; Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” which is addressed to eight clergymen who have asked him to stop protesting; and two newspaper articles racially critiquing the films Precious and The Blind Side. Each of these readings provoked comments like, “It’s not language that is harmful, it’s just what people think,” or “Well . . . if you’re going to live here you should have to know English.” In making such comments it was evident that the students were aligning themselves again with dominant practices that dismiss and ignore even explicit examples of oppression.

After returning students first portfolio and essay assignments, the struggle over authority grew enormously. As a policy I do not speak to students about their graded work for at least 24 hours—which is a rule because when students are disappointed about their grades they can get emotional and it is difficult for them, as well as myself, to have the conversation. They are required to read my feedback and then draft questions that specifically relate to the recommendations I provide. Despite my policy, students could not help but to question my evaluation practices. The first objection came from a white female. She raised her hand and stated, “You know the essay we all read in class as an example, you said you would give it a B– and well, my essay was way better, so how could that be?” I did not have time to respond before the second objection was called out from a white male, “Yeah that’s what I was thinking, that sample paper had all kinds of grammatical errors and I mean, mine doesn’t, and I think mine is way better too.” It was the fourth objection from a white male that triggered the most shock and yet also finally elicited a response. He said, “I’d like to have another reader. I mean I think it’s not fair that you’re the only one that assesses our work.” I stood firmly and simply stated, “It is not about grammar and quite frankly I don’t believe there is the possibility to have another reader.” I was most offended by the suggestion that I was not a fair evaluator. This wounds me on two levels; first, much of what I have learned about teaching writing has argued that grammar—although important—primarily acts as a “gatekeeping” mechanism (Gee et al.). Yet my students had learned to privilege such conventions and assumed they knew better than I did. Secondly, I was deeply troubled by the inference that I was not “objective enough” to grade fairly. Unfortunately, instead of standing my ground I engaged in some conversation about my assessment practices and even explained how I have used third-party readers in the past. Inadvertently, I provided fuel to their suspicion.

At the end of class, a student I’ll call John approached me and said the following, “I know you won’t talk about our portfolios, but I really think I need to have someone else read my paper. I mean I really think my paper deserved a better grade. I mean you even said that sometimes teachers do read each other’s students work. And, I mean how long have you been teaching? Did you say 3 years?” In the spirit of sharing and promoting equality in the classroom, I made the mistake of disclosing how long I had been teaching on the first day of class; I also made the immediate mistake of asking him to stop protesting; and two newspaper articles racially critiquing the films Precious and The Blind Side. Each of these readings provoked comments like, “It’s not language that is harmful, it’s just what people think,” or “Well . . . if you’re going to live here you should have to know English.” In making such comments it was evident that the students were aligning themselves again with dominant practices that dismiss and ignore even explicit examples of oppression.

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at the chance. By no means did the push-back, doubt, or entitlement stop there, but it did seem to be tempered by the fact that I met with each of them individually and spoke “rationally” about the grades they earned. Fortunately, the rest of the semester was far less volatile, but nonetheless it had been emotionally draining (hooks). As many teachers often do, I first considered what I might have done to provoke my students. However, my teaching style had been very successful in the past, and therefore I, felt confident in my ability to teach, but something was different with this particular class.

The only significant difference was the student demographic. In fact, that same semester I taught a second section of 205, and the classroom makeup was more ethnically diverse as well as primarily female. I taught the same curriculum and had minimal challenges in that class. Furthermore, my end-of-the-semester evaluations demonstrated that my teaching was received positively by the second class while my first class shared their suspicions of my teaching practices. Although I could provide several more specific examples, it is more important to learn how race and gender affect the teacher–student relationship in the classroom. Finally, I could not help but seriously take into account the work of several critical race theorists who have identified the complicated power relationships between teachers and students who do not share a common social location.

I found that when I was working with an ethnically diverse student population in California, our class inquiry, “Textual Representations of Race and Gender,” was relevant and interesting. At Syracuse University, with a significantly less ethnically diverse student body, the same inquiry was treated with suspicion and resistance. As a Latina, this inquiry also often elicited reactions from students who questioned my “agenda” as well as my credentials to evaluate them fairly and accurately. Perhaps, I did not have to contemplate the ramifications of releasing some of my authority when teaching at CSUF and FCC because Freire’s theories were in line with the needs of my students. I take this as a reminder that all theories of teaching need to be contextualized and considered in conjunction with the social locations of the intended audience and teachers. To be clear I am not suggesting that I—and other women of color—adopt an authoritarian approach to the classroom; instead, I am arguing for the importance of reevaluating and drafting a more nuanced and contextualized approach. Although my first reaction was to never teach this inquiry again, after much thought, not only have I decided to continue teaching writing courses about race and gender but also decided to make the “political” implications of the classroom more explicit. By bringing my own subjectivity as well as my students’ subjectivity to light, I hope to be able to continue adapting and evolving my teaching practices to better serve my students.

**Conclusion**

These narratives point to the need for universities to structurally support female teachers of color and retaining both female graduate students of color. Despite the increase of the proportion of women of color pursuing a doctoral degree at prestigious colleges and universities, their presence still remains scarce in academia. Systematic mentoring programs are necessary in not only professionalizing young women of color to pursue faculty positions but also in retaining incoming female faculty of color. For example, mentors can be paired with mentees and may include having a mentor observe your classes and provide any guidance on teaching. Mentors can also provide continuous feedback throughout, especially at the beginning stages of teaching careers.

We also advocate that more training and attention be given to the implications of teaching for women of color. Ultimately, we are calling for more consideration, support, and training for what it takes to negotiate such situations. For instance, the implications and complexity of including social justice issues in our classrooms need to be explicitly discussed with the teachers charged with teaching such curriculum. Additionally, the training and orientation for new teaching assistants needs to include honest discussions about the complex relationships between the students, teachers, and curriculum, especially as it relates to diversity. Not addressing these key issues adequately can ultimately lead to classroom disruptions, disrespect from resistant students, and ultimately, a withdrawal of female teachers of color from the academy.

Since women of color also have difficulties fitting into programs that are not designed to include students from different racial, class, gender, and cultural backgrounds (Margolis & Romero, 1998; Reyes & Halcon, 1988; Woods, 2001), there is also a need for faculty and administrators to provide supportive environments for their students. We also need to create spaces in which to have these critical dialogues between faculty, staff, and administrators.

It is also critical that female teachers of color speak out about these issues. Speaking about these issues can serve as a means to empower ourselves. Ignoring struggles in the larger academic culture only works to exonerate educational institutions from the responsibility of addressing issues of inequality, further marginalizing people of color. In naming these experiences, we hold institutions accountable to formulate solutions and implement policy. By naming our experiences, we hope to open up dialogues that focus on such struggles and actions and make social transformation within the larger political, educational, and social structures of power in the academy and beyond.

Last, and most important, as women of color we need to speak out about our experiences, and more specifically, address our struggles, so as not to be dismissed or silenced by colleagues, students, or university administrators. Writing
about these issues has been deliberate and intentional on our part. In writing about our struggles, we hope to bring to light an issue often dismissed. Making these issues public also serves as a means to resist oppression imposed upon us and to become empowered as women of color.

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Notes
1. This includes feminist pedagogues that have also dismissed issues of power and authority when considering women of color (Briskin, 1990; Bronstein, 1993; Delpit, 1988; Hoodfar, 1992; Maher & Thompson-Tetault, 1994; TuSmith & Reddy, 2002; Vargas, 1999).
4. The medical model approach identifies disability to be inherent in the person; the person needs “fixing” and “curing” as opposed to the social model approach of thinking about environmental obstacles that could deem a person disabled (see Linton, 2006).
5. Inclusive education as the valuing of diversity within community. “When inclusive education is fully embraced, we abandon the idea that children have to become ‘normal’ in order to contribute to the world. . . . We begin to look beyond typical ways of becoming valued members of the community, and in doing so, begin to realize the achievable goal of providing all children with an authentic sense of belonging”.
6. Inclusive schooling propels a critique of contemporary school culture and, thus, encourages practitioners to reinvent what can be and should be realized more humane, just, and democratic learning communities. Inequities in treatment and educational opportunity are brought to the forefront, thereby fostering attention to human rights, respect for difference, and value of diversity.
7. The use of military force to support the annexation by the United States and the illegal overthrowing of the Hawaiian monarchy. See Trask (1999), Kauanui (2008), and Hall (2008).
8. The mission of Camino Nuevo Charter Academy is to educate students in a college preparatory program to be literate, critical thinkers, and independent problem solvers who are agents of social justice with sensitivity toward the world around them (http://www.caminonuevo.org).

References


**Bios**


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